

Concordia Journal

Volume 40 | Number 3

Article 6

2014

Martin Luther's Platzregen in Action The Changing Face of Global Christianity

Douglas Rutt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ruttd@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rutt, Douglas (2014) "Martin Luther's Platzregen in Action The Changing Face of Global Christianity," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Martin Luther's *Platzregen* in Action The Changing Face of Global Christianity

Douglas L. Rutt

The study of the momentous demographic shifts in Christianity that have taken place in the past two decades has become a growth industry of sorts. Authors such as Philip Jenkins, with his seminal volume, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, published in 2002, led the charge when he documented the dramatic changes in the locus and look of Christianity that we have witnessed since the turn of the millennium.¹ He soon followed up with other titles related to that theme, such as *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South and God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*. For the past decade he has been in constant demand on the lecture circuit. Other noteworthy historians and theologians such as Mark Noll, Alister McGrath, and David Martin have followed up with their own perspectives on the topic.²

Changing Paradigms

Research on Christian history and missionary expansion is an ongoing task; however, perspectives change as time marches onward. Looking back to the recent past, one notes Ralph Winter's intriguing book, published in 1970, *Twenty-five Unbelievable Years: 1944-1969*. Picking up where Kenneth Scott Latourette's *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*³ left off, Winter documented the great growth of Christian missions from the West after World War II, what amounts to the explosion of missions from North America that occurred as the eyes of Americans were opened to the greater world. Many soldiers returned home at the end of the war with stories of new and exotic lands, where people yet needed to hear the message of the gospel. His primary concern was how the still dominant Western Christian mission agencies would relate to newer, younger churches in mission lands. He, like Latourette, was interested in the "infrastructure" of missions.⁴ The concluding statement of the book recognizes that it is difficult, from a human perspective, to understand the movement of the gospel throughout history and space. He wrote:

One thing seems clear: the fact that in Protestant missions many of the most significant forward steps in both the strategy of support, and the

Douglas L. Rutt is director of the International Ministries division for Lutheran Hour Ministries. He also serves as adjunct faculty at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has been a parish pastor, a missionary to Latin America, an LCMS missions executive for Latin America, and a professor of pastoral ministry and missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.



strategy of overseas operations, depend upon a far better understanding than we now have of the “anatomy of the Christian mission.”⁵

If those years twenty-five years that occupied Winter’s attention were “unbelievable,” the most recent twenty-five years are even more astounding in terms of the growth and the impact of Christianity in the Global South.⁶

Those involved in Christian mission at the international level have become acutely aware of the paradigmatic shift that has taken place in world Christianity. They have begun to wrestle with what it means for Christians to relate to one another globally on equal footing and the implications for the ongoing task of making disciples of all nations. New theological questions have arisen as non-Western churches have begun to articulate their own reflections. In other words, while the questions have changed, it is still a challenge to understand the “anatomy of the Christian mission” as the gospel moves from one place to another.

Martin Luther knew that the gospel was always on the move and that therefore it should never be taken for granted. He famously warned the German people:

O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God’s grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God’s word and grace is like a passing shower of rain [*Platzregen*] which does not return where it has once been . . . And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.⁷

Perhaps the predominance of the gospel in Germany endured for longer than Luther predicted, however the general truism holds. The gospel moves globally, gracing one place with its presence for a time, but quickly moving on to shower its blessings in new locations.

Philip Jenkins cites another famous figure from European history who made a similar point. St. Vincent de Paul, during the tragic days of the Thirty Years War, observed that Jesus had established his church and that it would endure to the end of time. However, he noted, it would not necessarily endure in Europe. St. Vincent predicted that the church would soon be a church of South America, Africa, China and Japan. Noting that perhaps St. Vincent was off on Japan, which has proven quite resistant to Christianity, Jenkins remarked, in a paper given in Seoul Korea: “Our traditional concept of the Christian world as a predominantly white and Euro-American world—of Western Christianity in fact—is no longer the norm. That fact has vast implications for notions of church and for mission.”⁸

Christianity Myths

When considering the picture of Christianity in today’s world, first it is necessary to address a couple of false notions regarding the Christian church. It is a widely held

myth, believed by many people around the world, that Christianity is a Western religion—a Western “import,” if you will. In places like Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, where Lutheran Hour Ministries carries out mass media outreach, it is commonplace for its staff to be accused of being agents of the Western world, who are trying to import a foreign Western religion along with its accompanying values and lifestyles. There have been times when those accusations are accompanied by threats of violence if the evangelistic activities are not suspended.

While it is true that in recent years, especially during past five centuries or so, Christianity has had a greater foothold in Europe and the Americas, in its essence—and in its past—Christianity is not a Western religion. It began in a part of the world we now know as the Middle East, and spread throughout northern Africa, much of Arabia, and southern Europe, extending even as far as China and India, long before it ever reached northern Europe and the Americas.

One recognizes that there were undoubtedly wide doctrinal variations during Christianity's first millennium and a half, as there are today; however, in terms of people claiming to be followers of “the way” of Jesus Christ, Christianity has had a deep and long history in the non-Western world, even in places now dominated by Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other religious movements.

Philip Jenkins asserts that from a Western perspective there is another history, which he calls the “lost history of Christianity.”⁹ Concerning the myopic vision of Christian history as told from the Western perspective, Philip Jenkins remarked: “The particular shape of Christianity with which we are familiar is a radical departure from what was for well over a millennium the historical norm: another, earlier global Christianity once existed.”¹⁰ In our understanding of the history of Christianity, he adds, “When we move our focus away from Europe, everything we think we know about Christianity shifts kaleidoscopically, even alarmingly.”¹¹

Western Christian historians have generally focused on the westward expansion of Christianity from its humble beginnings in Palestine. It is only logical, however, that Christianity likewise would have spread eastward from what became one of its principal centers of operations in the early church, where the term “Christian” was first coined, the city of Antioch. Antioch was a major Roman trading center on the Orontes River that united the West with the East in a multicultural, multilingual, and religiously diverse setting. That setting proved to be conducive to the message of the gospel.¹² The “lost history” of Christianity tells the story that during the first one thousand years of its history, one-third of the world's Christians lived in Asia, and as many as ten percent in Africa.¹³

Another myth regarding Christianity is that it is in decline. Again, from a Western perspective this seems to be true. It is understandable that Christians in America and Europe view themselves as being under siege. The major Protestant denominations are experiencing a precipitous decline in numbers, and the fastest growing category in the United States in terms of religion are the unaffiliated, or the “nones,” as they have been labeled.¹⁴ Without a doubt, in the West we are in a “post-Constantinian” era, where Christianity has lost its privileged place in society. The Christian church is considered by many to be an irrelevant, judgmental, rigid system of

social and moral standards from a bygone era. Christians in the West consider the great threat of an encroaching Islam, and fear that it will soon overtake Christianity in terms of the numbers of adherents.¹⁵

There are many signs of the decline of Christianity in North America and Europe, and this is certainly visible in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which has experienced a steady decline in membership of one to two percent per year for over thirty years. LCMS president Matthew Harrison reports that the last time any LCMS district grew was in the early 1990s.¹⁶

And yet, when one looks at the global picture, a different reality presents itself. Christianity, from a worldwide perspective, is not in decline, not merely holding its own, nor just barely growing; it is thriving.

Growth of Global Christianity

A caveat is in order when considering the statistics on world Christianity that follow. For the purposes of these comparisons, a Christian is he or she who self-identifies as such. He or she merely says, “I am a Christian.” This is in conformity with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the rights of anyone to define his or her religion. Of course such a definition has serious limitations and may not present an entirely accurate picture. It does not judge the orthodoxy of one’s belief, nor does it attempt to make a judgment on the genuineness of each individual’s faith. However, when looking at global trends from a wide perspective, these statistics help us understand where things have been and make it possible to make some projections about the future.¹⁷

Christianity vs. Islam

A recent report on the question of the relationship between the growth of Christianity and the growth of Islam focuses on the percentage of the world’s population that was either Christian or Muslim from 1900 to 2010. The report notes that there has been a slight decline in the percentage of Christians during that period, from 34.5 percent to 32.9 percent. It also notes that Islam, during that same period, has grown from 12.3 percent to 22.5 percent of the world’s population.¹⁸ This is a startling statistic, to be sure, and a challenge to Christian churches everywhere. It should be noted, however, that if one goes back to the year 1800, the world’s population that was Christian was only 22.7 percent. Thus Christianity has experienced growth as well, not only in sheer numbers, but also percentage-wise, in the ensuing years. The fact is that the percentage of the world’s population that self-defines as Christian has remained steady at about one-third for the past 150 years and is projected to remain at that percentage up through 2050.

According to the Center for the Study of Global Mission, which published the report “Status of Global Mission, 2014, in the Context of AD 1800–2025,” in mid-2014 there are over 2.37 billion Christians of “all kinds” in the world today. That represents 33 percent of the world’s population. By the year 2025, that number is projected to grow to over 2.7 billion, which will represent almost 34 percent of the world’s popula-

tion. In fact, in spite of what one might think, there are almost one billion more people in the world today who identify themselves as Christian as compared to adherents to Islam, although Islam is growing at a slightly faster rate, with projections that by 2025, 24.6 percent of the world's population will be Muslim.¹⁹

In terms of the sheer numbers of Christians in the world, we have seen a steady growth from 205 million in 1800, more than doubling to 558 million in 1900, more than doubling again to 1.2 billion in 1970, and doubling again until reaching almost 2.4 billion in 2014, with a projection of 2.7 billion Christians by the year 2025.²⁰ Much of this growth can be correlated with the growth of the world's population. It took all of human history for the world's population to reach one billion in the early 1800s, but then only about one hundred years more to reach two billion around 1930. In the seventy ensuing years (by the year 2000), the world's population had tripled to over six billion, and as of 4:22 p.m., CDT, June 5, 2014, the world's population was at 7,170,689,642.²¹ World population growth does not account for all of the growth of Christianity, however. While the world population growth rate from 1800 to 2000 averaged 1.17 percent per annum, the growth rate of Christianity during that same period stood at 1.29 percent.²² In other words, Christianity is growing at a slightly higher rate than the world's population in general.

Seismic Shift

But a seismic shift has taken place, not only in the increasing numbers of Christians, but also in terms of where those Christians are to be found. In the year 1900, 82 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. By the year 2014, over 65 percent of the world's Christians live *outside of* North American and Europe. The biggest shift has taken place in Africa. In the year 1900, the continent of Africa had a total population of around one hundred million. Of that one hundred million people, only 9 percent, or nine million, were Christians. By 2014 the total population of Africa has ballooned to 1.125 billion²³ and Christianity has experienced a remarkable growth, now to over 520 million Christians, or over 46 percent of the population. Projections indicate that by the year 2025 there will be more than 680 million Christians in Africa, up from projections of just 663 million only two years ago.²⁴ This shift is further illustrated by noting that in 1900 only 2 percent of the world's Christians lived in Africa, down from possibly 10 percent in the first millennium AD. As of mid-2014, however, 23 percent of the world's Christians reside in Africa. There are more than twice as many Protestants, broadly defined, in Nigeria than there are in Germany, the birthplace of the Reformation.²⁵

Asia, a part of the world we do not normally consider to have much fertile soil for Christianity, is, in fact, also seeing signs of remarkable Christian vitality. Currently there are more than 368 million Christians living in Asia. That is up almost 100 million from 271 million in the year 2000, and only 91 million in 1970. By 2025 the number of Christians in Asia is expected to grow to almost 464 million.

The incredible growth of Christianity in China is truly a phenomenon that has taken us by surprise. This writer remembers when Dr. Edward Westcott, former

executive director for LCMS missions, spoke to seminary students on the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary in the early 1980s regarding the status of Christianity around the world. He stated that he did not know for sure what was happening in China and that he did not know if we would ever know. He did suggest that reports indicated that there were perhaps two to three million Christians in China, survivors from the missionary era. In fact, the church in China has grown, and continues to grow, at an amazing rate.

Data is not easy to obtain since the size of the Christian population in China is a politically sensitive issue. That the church is likely larger than the communist party is an open secret in China, but one that is not flaunted by the church. Yet, even government data, however under representative it may be, documents the fact that there has been tremendous growth in the number of Christians since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese government figures from 2006 documented a 50 percent increase in the ten years from 1997 to 2006.²⁶ The Pew Research report on global Christianity states that today there are over 67 million Christians in China,²⁷ although those figures are up for debate. *Operation World*, taking into consideration official statistics as well as reports from church leaders and other networks, estimated that there were over 105 million Christians in 2010²⁸ Furthermore, former *Time* Beijing bureau chief, David Aikman, estimated that within three decades of the time he wrote (2003), there will be somewhere between 280 to 420 million Christians in China.²⁹ Aikman makes the assertion in *Jesus in Beijing*, that “China is in the process of becoming Christianized.”³⁰ Elder Fu Xianwei, national chairperson of the Three-Self Patriotic Church in China reported to this writer in February 2011 that three churches are planted every two days in China.³¹

Lutheranism ≠ Germanic

The demographic shifts in world Christianity in general are also impacting world Lutheranism.³² In the year 2010, the Lutheran World Federation reported the nations with the largest number of Lutherans. As one would expect, the largest three are Germany (12.7 million), the United States (7.4 million) and Sweden (6.7 million). Most would be surprised to learn that the fourth largest Lutheran nation was Indonesia, with over 5.6 million members in twelve different denominations.³³ Interestingly, Indonesia is also the fourth most populous nation in the world, with almost 254 million inhabitants,³⁴ and the largest Muslim nation in the world, with almost 210 million Muslims. Moreover, the median age of Christians (twenty-six) in Indonesia (almost all belong to a Lutheran denomination) is slightly younger than the median age of Muslims (twenty-eight).³⁵

Since the time of that report, Indonesia has moved into sixth place, according to the Lutheran World Federation statistical report for 2013. Indonesia continued to grow to over 5.81 million total Lutherans, but has now been surpassed by Ethiopia and Tanzania, both of which have experienced an acceleration of their growth with the Evangelical Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus of Ethiopia reporting over 6.35 million members and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania reporting over 5.82 million.³⁶

In the period of the 2013 Lutheran World Federation report referenced above, India and Ethiopia were shown to be the two nations with the fastest growing Lutheran

churches, India adding 1.7 million members and Ethiopia some 600,000. At the same time, some Lutheran denominations in North America declined precipitously, especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which dropped from 4,543,037 members in 2010³⁷ to 3,950,924 in 2013.³⁸ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, continues to decline at a rate of 1 to 2 percent per year (24,000 to 48,000) as mentioned above.

In summary, it is quite evident that the church in the West will face—and is facing, whether it wants to or not—a new world in which many theological and practical challenges present themselves. Church scholars and researchers have taken notice of these global challenges since the 1970s. Yet, as Philip Jenkins asserts, “outside the ranks of scholars and church bureaucrats, few commentators have paid serious attention to these trends” which he goes on to describe as “the creation of a new Christendom, which for better or worse may play a critical role in world affairs.”³⁹ It is evident that Martin Luther’s “rain shower” metaphor is playing itself out in a significant way during this first part of the new millennium, and will continue to impact theological reflection, ecclesiastical relations, and the look and feel of Christianity in the decades to come.

The Growth of Christianity in the Global South

To an astonished Nicodemus, Jesus explained how the Spirit of God works to produce faith in some places and in others perhaps not: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). One should be careful not to offer overly simplistic answers to the question of why there has been such tremendous growth of Christianity in the Global South. Yet perhaps there is some value in trying to understand, from a human perspective, what factors brought us to this point.

Historian Mark Noll, in *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*, wrestled with the question of how the gospel has spread and taken root so firmly in the Majority World by attempting to understand the influence of American Christianity and the modern missionary movement from North America. He states his thesis concisely toward the end of his study:

The main point of this book is that American Christianity is important for the world primarily because the world is coming more and more to look like America. Therefore, the way that Christianity developed in the American environment helps to explain the way Christianity is developing in many parts of the world.⁴⁰

Noll offers an immediate caveat stating that the correlation he presents does not imply causation. His point is that much can be learned from the American experience to shed light on what is happening elsewhere. For Noll, the entrepreneurial and flexible nature of American religious practice and organization, the voluntary nature of the Christian church in America, and the democratic values generally held to by churches in America, are key to understanding how and why the church in the rest of the world was formed and functions today.

Noll also documents other correlations, if not causations, for the expansion of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First, he documents the impact of the large number of missionaries who were willing to risk their lives to bring the gospel to people in distant lands in harsh surroundings. He quotes, for example, an anthropologist critical of the modern missionary movement, who yet had to give credit to missionaries in at least one example:

Had the Yuqui not been contacted by the New Tribes missionaries, the only people at the time willing to risk their lives in this process, it is certain that they would have been killed off or taken as [slaves]. . . . The fact of the matter is that very few people who do not have the driving zeal of the missionary are willing to put their lives on the line in a contact effort and to then devote the remainder of their existence to the difficult process of acculturation.⁴¹

Missionary work emanating from the West was without question an important factor in the establishment of Christianity in new lands.

An additional factor in the growth of Christianity globally for Noll is the translation of the Bible into the local languages of the people. He cites the role of the translation of the Bible into the common language of the people, *Hangul*, as being instrumental in the indigenization of the Christian church in Korea, where Christianity has grown more than in any other major part of Asia.⁴²

The production and distribution of the *Jesus Film* is signaled by Noll as one of the most important influences in the propagation of Christianity in contemporary times. Noll comments: "Yet for sheer scale and reach, there has been as yet nothing to compare with Campus Crusade's *Jesus Film* project."⁴³ As of June 10, 2014, the entire *Jesus Film* is available in 1229 languages around the world.⁴⁴ It continues to draw thousands of viewers at events sponsored by Lutheran Hour Ministries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Another factor, which cannot be overlooked, is the role of mass media, especially radio, in the dissemination of the gospel around the world. Since Walter A. Maier championed the cause of making Christ known to the nations with the launch of the nationally syndicated *Lutheran Hour* broadcasts in 1930, other entities, such as Far East Radio Broadcasting, begun in 1945, and Trans World Radio, begun in 1954, have followed suit. Some anecdotal accounts illustrate the impact of radio. There is the story of the young Filipino man, Alvaro Cariño, who first heard the gospel on *The Lutheran Hour* while working for a businessman in the United States in the 1930s. He then sought out and became a member of a local Lutheran congregation, eventually finding his way to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, graduating in 1937. After serving in Chicago for several years, he finally realized his dream of returning to the Philippines as the LCMS's first missionary there in 1946, thus becoming the founder of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines.⁴⁵ When Rev. Bernard Pankow, LCMS missionary to Mexico, made his first exploratory visits to Central America, one of his stops was to visit the radio stations where the Spanish version of the *Lutheran Hour* was already being broadcast, and which had resulted in the requests from that region for Lutheran missionary work.⁴⁶ To

this author's knowledge, several congregations in Brazil, and at least one congregation in Guatemala, have been founded as a result of responses to Lutheran Hour Ministries' radio broadcasts.

The Word and Spirit

A significant characteristic of Majority World Christianity is its tendency toward a theological conservatism. Much to the chagrin of some contemporary, progressive theologians, the younger churches in Africa and Asia tend to hold to a high view of Scripture as the word of God, given to man to provide direction on both doctrinal and moral matters. The Bible is much more likely to be taken literally, with particular fascination with dreams, visions, healings, and other supernatural events. As Philip Jenkins has discovered in his research, the Old Testament is considered to be as valid as the New Testament, and many Christians in the Global South can resonate with Old Testament stories that often leave Western Christians baffled. Part of the attraction to a more literalist interpretation of the Bible can be attributed to the fact that the world and the worldview of the Bible, including both Testaments, is more readily accessible to those whose lived realities, such as their social and economic realities, are similar to the lived realities of the faithful of biblical times.⁴⁷

The way in which the Bible is read is affected by the Southern worldview. The significance of a biblical account can vary greatly depending on how one approaches Scripture, and how one approaches Scripture depends largely on the questions one is asking. Do you live in a world in which you face one crisis after another, in which you have very little control over what happens next and are simply struggling to feed yourself and your family this day? Or, do you live a relatively comfortable and secure life, in which most of your daily needs are taken care of and you have plenty of time for recreation, contemplation and "ear tickling" (2 Tm 4:3).

Author Philip Roth remarked—comparing the life of a writer in Czechoslovakia during the communist era with the life of a writer in America—"When I was first in Czechoslovakia it occurred to me that I work in a society where, for writers, everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters."⁴⁸ There is applicability of this statement to one's view of Scripture as well. The pole at which one finds oneself will surely impact one's approach to the word of God. Does everything matter as one approaches God's word or does everything go in terms of the liberties one feels free to take with that word? When in essence "nothing goes," that is, nothing can be taken for granted, everything that the Bible teaches matters. There is a greater urgency to finding solutions to life's daily challenges, and thus one does not take liberties by producing fanciful, esoteric, idiosyncratic, or abstruse interpretations. Alister McGrath calls it the "marginalization of theology" in the Western world.⁴⁹ While in the West, it is possible to chase after one's own idiosyncratic interpretation, motivated by a fascination with speculative theologies made possible by the luxury of life in the West,⁵⁰ in the Global South the harsh realities of daily life press in on Christians causing them to look for serious and immediate answers to serious and immediate questions.

This provides at least a partial explanation to the rise of Pentecostalism around the world; it addresses the pressing needs of people. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has conducted extensive research on the spread of Pentecostalism worldwide, having published a report in 2007, "Spirit and Power." A common thread that the study revealed was that "renewalists" (the inclusive terms used in the report for both Pentecostals and charismatics) generally do not hold to the dichotomistic worldview of the West. They do not differentiate between the "spiritual" and the "material." This means that renewalists, and one can conclude, Christians in the Global South generally, see that God is involved in one's life in all its dimensions, which includes matters of health, wealth, well-being in general, as well as questions of one's eternal destiny. As the report states: "Majorities of Pentecostals in all 10 countries surveyed agree that God will grant good health and relief from sickness to believers who have enough faith; and in nine of the countries, most Pentecostals say that God will grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith."⁵¹ During a recent visit to Sierra Leone, this writer noted two popular Christian churches whose names reflect how many there see the place of the Bible and the power of God in people's lives: One church is called the Flaming Bible Church, and another is the Winner's Church. For most people in the Global South, the spirit and the physical world are intimately linked. In fact, they really are not seen as dichotomous but rather as part of the totality or whole of existence, and Pentecostalism is very effective in reflecting that worldview.

Another result of taking the Bible seriously is the growing chasm between churches in the Global South and their more liberal spiritual fathers.⁵² Churches in the Global South generally take a more conservative stance toward issues of moral responsibility. A most recent example from Lutheranism is the ultimatum issued by the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EEMCY) to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to reverse its position allowing for the ordination/consecration of homosexual bishops and pastors. After the demand was ignored for several years, the then six million plus member Ethiopian church officially broke fellowship with both the ELCA and the Church of Sweden, stating that it will not practice altar and pulpit fellowship with any church that openly disobeys the clear teachings of Scripture on marriage.⁵³ The EEMCY took this stance in spite of the fact that that breaking fellowship could imply a significant loss of material support.

Learning for the Western Church

It would be overly ambitious to attempt to offer a comprehensive answer to the question of what the changing face of Christianity will mean for the church of the West. It is clear, however, that the future of not only the church, but most would say even of the world, will be impacted due to the fact that churches in the Global South have a more holistic view of the relation between faith and life, including political life. David Aikman, for example, predicts the "Christianization" of China. He does not mean, thereby, that Christians will necessarily become the majority there, but that Christianity will grow to a critical mass that will have an important influence on how the China sees itself in relation to the rest of the world. A Christianized China will no

longer be concerned with how to “outmaneuver and neutralize” the United States, but will see itself from a more “Augustinian” perspective. According to Aikman, China would see itself more in terms of its global responsibility, and with a more “profound sense of restraint, justice, and order in the wielding of state power” due to the influence of Christianity.⁵⁴ One can only hope that such a prediction will become a reality.

One could hope for similar results in other nations of the Global South. The highly moral nature of Christian expression, while certainly imposed legalistically in many churches, could still have a profound influence on issues of politics, justice, and charity. Mark Noll suggests this possibility and comments on the “effects of God’s saving works for the world as a whole,” based on the vision in Revelation 21:24: “By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” He states: “The passage also hints at the sanctification of the world’s diverse cultures. The kings—we might expand this to the cultures of the world—with their glory will enter the heavenly city.”⁵⁵

Theological Implications

There are theological implications and challenges to be faced as well, as the center of Christianity moves to the South. Martin Kähler is credited with saying “missions is the mother of theology.”⁵⁶ As the church expands geographically, socially, culturally, and linguistically, it is called to address new questions. The Jerusalem Council is a clear example (Acts 15:1–35). The apostles wrestled with the applicability of the Jewish law—such as the need for circumcision—to the new Gentile converts in Antioch. For some, the answers seemed obvious: The new converts must observe the (ceremonial) law of Moses. But the answers are not always that easy. A true theologian is one who is willing to recognize that sometimes more thoughtful reflection is needed and an issue needs to be considered holistically.

When one considers the theology of the newer churches in the Global South—especially the influence of the renewalist movement with its emphasis on obtaining health and wealth—theological concerns are justifiable. While some believe that it is legitimate to redefine the central doctrine of justification to accommodate the prosperity gospel, such moves go beyond the teachings of Scripture on the centrality of justification.⁵⁷ In spite of the excesses, perhaps there is something on which the Western church can reflect.⁵⁸ Has theology from the Western perspective become so much a matter of the mind that we fail to address the wholeness of life that Jesus promised? (Jn 10:10). Alister McGrath, taking his cue from Pannenberg, suggests there is something to be learned from those whose theological approach is shaped by other environments:

Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that western theology has been shaped by its engagement with the rise of the natural sciences and the secular critique of authority. Yet precisely because these critiques are especially associated with the western world, might not very different styles of systematic theology arise when the engagement in questions is not western, but reflects issues in the emerging world—such as an encounter with Hinduism rather than secularism?⁵⁹

If one accepts this possibility, it becomes apparent that in the future Western theologians will be challenged and enriched as different cognitive thought processes and contextual issues are brought to bear on theological reflection.

Mark Noll highlights this new Christian future optimistically:

In world Christian terms, some national expressions of Christian faith may seem more prominent than others, but all are in fact equally necessary for the well-being of all, and all are equally dependent upon the rest. This picture suggests that some goods may continue to flow predominately from the West . . . money, formal education or expertise in managing the opportunities and crises of globalization. But it also suggests that other goods should be expected to flow in the other direction—perhaps lessons on experiencing Christ's peace when there is no money, instruction on how at the same time to love and confront members of other faiths, reminders of how the living exist in close proximity to the dead, or practical examples in overcoming historical antagonism through the direct power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

Without question, the Western church is looked to for theological insight, direction, and clarity. However, as Majority World theologians begin to exert their influence on theological reflection, and as the life of their churches demonstrates to the West the power and the tangible nature of the gospel in the face of harsh economic, social and political realities, famine, persecution, and even martyrdom, one can only conclude that all will be uplifted and enriched.

It will require flexibility and openness on the part of the Western church in the quest to understand before passing judgment. A prison chaplain, commenting on the tough environment of ministry in the federal penitentiary system, said, "To do this work, you have to be very sure about who you are and what you believe." It would seem that in as much as Western theologians are able to have that kind of confidence they will be able to face the theological insights of Majority World Christianity honestly and fairly. This is not to say that anything goes theologically, but rather that Western theologians should and can have the confidence to accept the challenge not to accept the easy answers, that is, if they are up to the task of being reflective theologians.

Endnotes

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2002).

² See, for example, Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2009).

³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Advance Through Storm: A.D. 1914 and After, with Concluding Generalizations* (A History of the Expansion of Christianity) (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945).

⁴ Ralph Winter, *Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years: 1944–1969* (Pasadena: William Cary Library, 1970), xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ The term "Third World" is no longer considered appropriate in describing the non-Western world. Other more acceptable terminology, such as "Majority World" and "Global South" are used in this paper interchangeably.

⁷ *Luther's Works* eds. Helmut T Lehman and James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 45:352.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, "The Bible in a Changing Christian World" (Seoul: Unpublished, 2010).

- ⁹ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 10.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 11.
- ¹² Douglas L. Rutt, "Antioch as Paradigmatic of the Urban Center of Mission," *Missio Apostolica* 11 no. 1 (St. Louis: Lutheran Society for Missiology, 2003): 35–43.
- ¹³ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 11.
- ¹⁴ "Religious Landscape Survey, Report 1: Religious Affiliations," Pew Research Center, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.
- ¹⁵ Those fears about Islam notwithstanding, Buddhism has more adherents than Islam in the United States. Moreover, the Pew Center reports: "In sharp contrast to Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism in the U.S. is primarily made up of native-born adherents, whites and converts. Only one-in-three American Buddhists describe their race as Asian, while nearly three-in-four Buddhists say they are converts to Buddhism."
- ¹⁶ Matthew Harrison, "President's Report" (report to the Board for International Mission. St. Louis, May 31, 2014).
- ¹⁷ It is important to remember that projections are based on underlying assumptions remaining the same.
- ¹⁸ "Is Christian Growth Keeping Pace with Islam?" *Christianity Today* (accessed June 4, 2014), <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/is.christian.growth.keeping.pace.with.islam/37066.htm>.
- ¹⁹ "Status of Global Mission, 2014, in the Context of AD 1800–2025" Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (accessed June 4, 2014), <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/StatusOfGlobalMission.pdf>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ United States Census Bureau, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/region.php>.
- ²² "Status of Global Mission," Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.
- ²³ Africa is a continent of young people, and as a result, all indications are that the population of Africa will continue outpacing other regions in terms of population. In the *Economist's Pocket World in Figures: 2014 Edition* twenty-nine of the thirty-five nations with the youngest median age are in Africa, and projections indicate that all ten of the youngest nations in the year 2050 will be in Africa. Compare, for example, Uganda, with a median age of 15.7, with the United States, whose median age is 37. An even starker contrast is with Germany, whose median age is 44.3. See Andrea Burgess and Mark Doyle, *The Economist Pocket World in Figures* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 18.
- ²⁴ "Status of Global Mission," Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.
- ²⁵ "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Center (accessed June 6, 2014). <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* 7th ed. (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 215. The Pew report, *Global Christianity*, Appendix C, contains a comprehensive review of the various studies conducted by Chinese and outside researchers on the demographics of Christianity in China.
- ²⁹ These figures are based on Aikman's prediction that in three decades (2033) China will be 20 to 30 percent Christian. Indeed, the rate of the growth of Christianity in China has accelerated since 2003. The numbers suggested above take into consideration his prediction based on a total population of 1.4 billion, the point at which China's population is projected to peak by around 2025. See United States Census Bureau, 2013.
- ³⁰ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 285.
- ³¹ The study of Christianity in China, which can be approached from historical, sociological, theological and/or missiological perspectives, is a topic unto itself, but well-worth further consideration. See Douglas L. Rutt, "Trip Report: China and Hong Kong, January 5–19, 2012" (St. Louis: unpublished, 2012).
- ³² Again, it is recognized that there are vast variations of theology and practice within Lutheranism. For this statistical analysis, figures will be included for those who self-identify as Lutheran.
- ³³ Lutheran World Information, *2010 World Lutheran Membership Details* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2011), 5–12.
- ³⁴ United States Census Bureau, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/region.php>.
- ³⁵ "Indonesia," Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, accessed June 10, 2014, http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/indonesia/religious_demography/#/?affiliations_religion_id=16&affiliations_year=2010.

- ³⁶ Lutheran World Information, *The Lutheran World Federation—2013 Membership Figures*. Statistical Report (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2013), 5–7.
- ³⁷ Lutheran World Information, *2010 World Lutheran Membership Details*, 12.
- ³⁸ Lutheran World Information, *The Lutheran World Federation—2013 Membership Figures*, 12.
- ³⁹ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3–4.
- ⁴⁰ Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 189.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 156–157.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁴⁴ *The Jesus Film Project*, Campus Crusade for Christ, accessed June 10, 2014, <http://www.jesustfilm.org/film-and-media/statistics/languages-completed>.
- ⁴⁵ Concordia Historical Institute, Today in History: September 21, 1908, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://www.lutheranhistory.org/history/tih0921.htm>. See also “Alvaro Carino,” *Chicago Sun Times*, September 3, 1998, accessed June 9, 2014. <http://www.lutheranhistory.org/history/tih0921.htm>.
- ⁴⁶ Bernard Pankow, “*La Aurora*,” or, *Dawn Over Guatemala: A Day by Day Account of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s First Mission Outreach in Guatemala ; Including Details of an Exploratory Trip to El Salvador and Honduras* (San Jose, CA: 1995).
- ⁴⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford, 2006), 4–5.
- ⁴⁸ See Philip Roth, “The Romance of Oppression,” *A Besieged Culture: Czechoslovakia Ten Years after Helsinki*, ed. A. Heneka (Stockholm: The Charta 77 Foundation, 1985), 52.
- ⁴⁹ Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 128.
- ⁵⁰ In the experience of this writer, having taught graduate students from both the West and the Majority World, the contrast between the two approaches to Scripture have been evident. North American students are regularly quite captivated by the epistemological speculations of post-modern philosophies, but often the international students fail to see the point. An international student from Africa once remarked something to the effect: “Where I come from, we don’t have time to speculate on the nature of reality. We are faced with reality every day.”
- ⁵¹ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Spirit and Power: A Ten Country Survey of Pentecostals* (Washington, DC: The Pew Research Center, 2007).
- ⁵² See some early examples of the beginnings of this rift in this writer’s paper “The Future of Christianity and Its Implications for Theological Education” (Rutt 2004), presented at the 2003 Conference of LCMS Theological Educators. Since that time the research on the demographic shifts in world Christianity has expanded, showing that predictions regarding the shift, as remarkable as they were at the time, were below what has become the reality.
- ⁵³ Katharine Weber, “Ethiopian Church Severs Ties with Lutherans Over Homosexuality,” *The Christian Post*, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/ethiopian-church-severs-ties-with-lutherans-over-homosexuality-89745/>.
- ⁵⁴ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 285–287.
- ⁵⁵ Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 200.
- ⁵⁶ As quoted by Ott: “The earliest mission became the mother of theology, because it attacked the contemporary culture.” See Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), xviii.
- ⁵⁷ Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar respond to the phenomenal growth of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, a Brazilian based movement that promises prosperity, by suggesting an alternative to the historic doctrine of justification: “God is not centered in the announcement of forgiveness of sins and justification. God is experienced intimately and intensely as broken lives are reorganized, as those considered ‘worthless’ and ‘insignificant’ discover their worth before God, and as those who thought they could do nothing to change their situation of the world are empowered to act.” See Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 146.
- ⁵⁸ Robert Bennet has demonstrated how a holistic approach to mission and ministry, in which deliverance plays a central role in addressing the pressing concerns of the people, is carried out in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. Robert H. Bennet, *I Am Not Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013).
- ⁵⁹ McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*, 140–141.
- ⁶⁰ Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 198.